

Mc Dougall's Good Stories for Children

A Curious Story From the "Land of Make-Believe" About Ponce de Leon, His Fountain of Youth and What Its Waters Did for a Man

THREE hundred years ago, if you told a grown man about dragons, witches, basilisks or a fountain of perpetual youth, he would not have disbelieved a word of your tale; but nowadays any boy can sit up and contradict you if you tell anything that seems improbable, and he will often be real impudent into the bargain.

But there are lots of nice boys and girls who, whether the story is probable or not, are pleased to hear it, and who know that in the "Land of Make-believe" the most astonishing things are always happening, and to them I tell all my stories, you may be sure.

Old Mr. Linton, who had, when young, read perhaps every fairy tale that was known in his day, who also knew more history, probably, than any teacher in town, for he was always reading history, never believed a single thing that was at all out of the ordinary, after he grew up. Thus, when he came across a strange tale about prisoners in Siberia, or some remarkable anecdote about Benjamin Franklin or George Washington, for instance, he would sneer, turn up his nose and say:

"Hum! How do they know that any such improbable thing ever happened at all? Bosh, and also Fudge!"

He actually did not believe things that he read in the daily papers, so extremely extravagant had grown this habit of discrediting and disbelieving everything. In fact, he had become so incredulous that unless he saw a thing happen, saw it with his own eyes, he simply doubted the report.

So, when one night he fell asleep in his easy chair, in the lonely big house in which he dwelt, everything that happened to him he concluded was merely dreams. He had been reading "The History of the Spanish Main" all the evening, and naturally imagined that the book had affected his sleeping thoughts and induced a most remarkable dream, that was all; but as you will see, he was not long holding this opinion.

It seemed to Mr. Linton that he was still awake when there appeared beside him a man clad in shining armor, all damascened with gold, in a pattern somewhat like a carpet, flowers, sprays and leaves amid twining scrolls of gold that glittered in the lamplight with dazzling brilliancy. The visor or peak of his great helmet was pushed up, and Mr. Linton saw a face that was bold and stern and a pair of dark eyes that seemed to pierce right into him. His first thought was that the apparition must be some friend of his who had stopped in on the way to a masquerade ball, but the face was utterly unknown to him. Nevertheless, he was not at all alarmed nor even surprised at this sudden intrusion, nor did he seem to wonder how the man in armor had entered his room. It seemed, somehow, to be quite natural.

While he stared at his strange visitor he heard the bell in the City Hall tower strike twelve, and then he suddenly glanced at a picture which hung on his wall just behind the armored knight. It represented the landing of Ponce de Leon upon the coast of Florida, and showed the Spanish adventurer standing upon the strand with his sword raised toward a great banner. He instantly turned his eyes upon his visitor and immediately recognized him as Ponce de Leon himself, for every feature—eyes, beard, armor and all—was exactly similar to that of the leader in the old print on the wall.

Just why the Spaniard should call upon him he was at first at a loss to guess, but he seemed to think with great rapidity at that moment, and almost instantly came to the conclusion that it was because he had taken Spanish lessons when a boy. But the Spaniard spoke in English a moment after and asked:

"Roderigo Lintro, where are your children?"

"I have no children, thank Heaven!" Mr. Linton answered, "and my name is not Roderigo Lintro, but Roderick Linton."

"Though you know it not, you are my sword-bearer, Roderigo," said the visitor, grimly frowning. "You have been permitted again and again to inhabit the bodies of men, while I lay 'neath the sand under the palms, but nonetheless you are still mine."

"I think you have made some mistake," replied Mr. Linton, calmly, for he had already concluded, you see, that he was dreaming. "I never met you before, although I know from that picture yonder who you are. What do you wish? Can I serve you in any way?"

"How many children love you?" asked the frowning visitor.

"Oh, bosh!" replied Mr. Linton. "What have I to do with children? Thank goodness, I am neither a school superintendent nor in the toy business. I am in the fire insurance business."

"How many children do you love, then?" asked the knight, still persistent.

"I hate all the brood!" snarled the old man. "If I had my way they'd all be smothered as soon as they were born! Nasty, noisy, fidgety, inquisitive, sticky, hungry brats, I have no use for any of them!"

"Would you not be a boy again if you could?" asked Ponce de Leon.

"Well, hum; I can't answer that off-hand," replied Mr. Linton. "Depends on what sort of boy, and perhaps whose boy. If I could be the son of a millionaire, well—perhaps I might consent."

"Come with me," said the knight, turning to the door, which to his surprise Mr. Linton saw was wide open.

He rose and followed his visitor slowly, not quite certain whether he was really walking or floating along, but before he could determine he found himself in an entirely different atmosphere and amid other and utterly strange surroundings. Great palms waved over his head, ferns and cacti grew in the glaring white sand beneath his feet, while birds of gorgeous hues stalked along the edge of the wide, dark stream flowing slowly by.

He knew at once that he was in the tropics, although his knowledge of strange lands was confined merely to books and pictures, as he had never traveled.

He had little time to speculate, and Ponce de Leon strode away beneath the overhanging palms and he had to follow, for something seemed to draw him along. In a few minutes they stopped again, this time beside a still pool whose velvety surface reflected the green foliage and the deep blue sky above, and seemed like a great polished gem of emerald and sapphire. It rested in a basin of the purest, whitest rock, and when he looked into its depths he could see every tiny grain of the stone at the very bottom, so clear and limpid was the sparkling water. All about the grass grew green and tall, and not a footprint nor a bended blade was visible, showing that the lovely pool was never visited by man or beast, apparently.

"Know you this?" asked the Spanish knight, as he pointed to the water.

"Never saw it before, I am sure," replied the man. "It is very pretty."

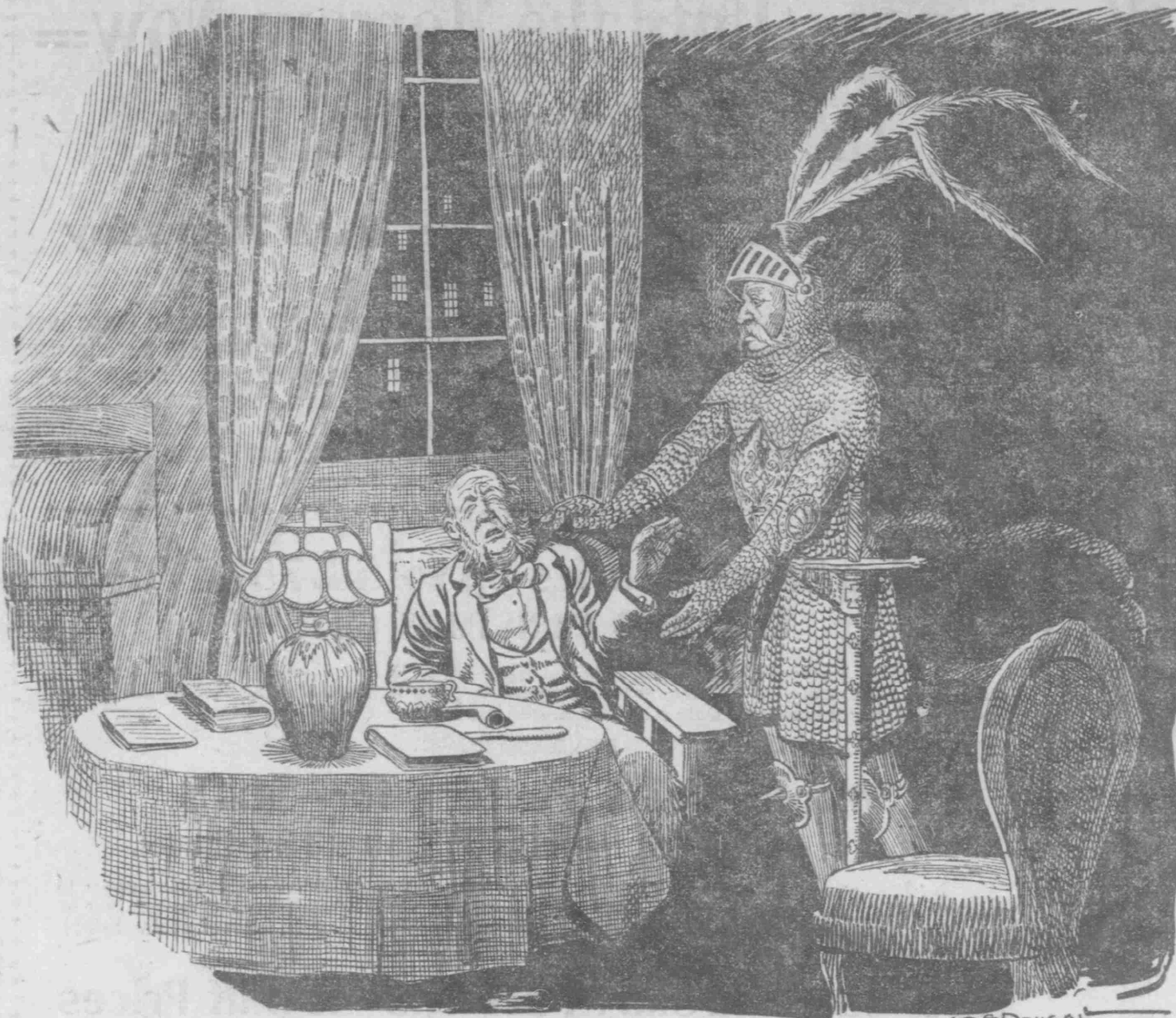
Then Mr. Linton remembered suddenly what Ponce de Leon's quest had been, and recalled how that ill-fated and credulous man had lost his life seeking in the Florida swamps for the fabled Fountain of Youth. He asked, in an awed tone of voice:

"Is this—can this really be the Fountain of Youth?"

"Tis that charmed pool," replied the knight. "In its waters lie Youth—Youth perpetual and fresh. He who bathes in it emerges with new life and powers and keeps them forever."

"Then he goes," cried Mr. Linton, immediately. "I won't lose this chance."

He sprang into the fountain, clothes and all, before Ponce de Leon could stop him, dived clear to its pebbly bottom in an instant, and there his head coming in contact with something he seized it at once. When he came to the surface he found the Spanish knight gazing anxiously at him, and he also saw that



HE RECOGNIZED THE VISITOR AS PONCE DE LEON

he held in his own hand a curious bottle or vase. He clambered out smiling and said:

"Well, I have tested your old fountain, Mr. Ponce de Leon, and now we will see what it can do."

As he spoke he saw the Spanish knight's face alter, and when his whole figure seemed to pale and become misty. He stared hard at the vanishing form, and it slowly faded away into the forest, leaving him standing there with the antique bottle in his hand. Then the forest also vanished, the sunshine changed to the glare of his lamp and he found himself in his old easy chair at home.

Suddenly he started in amazement, for there upon his table stood the curious bottle, filled to the top with a sparkling fluid that gleamed like the purest crystal in the lamplight. He reached out his hand in doubt and took it up.

"This is marvelous!" he exclaimed. "How did this get here? Somebody has been here while I slept."

But he soon found that his door was locked securely. There was the strange bottle, however, and the thought came to him of testing its powers, and without thinking of the possible danger of such a test, he undressed and then rubbed himself from head to foot with the sparkling fluid.

He ran to the mirror and looked in. He had changed to a man of twenty-five. His once white hair was a rich brown, and as he smiled a row of long-lost teeth showed gleaming in the glass.

"Bless my soul!" he cried, jumping back ten feet. "It was the water of Youth, after all, and I did not dream. I am young again." He pinched his full, round muscles and noted how strong he was, then looked in the glass and grinned. "Ha, ha!" he shouted. "It is only a little past midnight; why go to bed so early? I will venture abroad in search of adventures instead of wasting my fond youth in sleep!"

"I'll go down to the club," he said with a grin, "and see what the old fogies, who are perhaps still sitting up, will say when they see me."

At the door of the club he was met by the old colored man who for twenty years had stood guard there, but when he cheerfully said "Good evening, Isaac," the man stared at him and then said:

"Excuse me, sah, but who do you wish to see?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Linton. "Don't you know me, Isaac? I am Mr. Linton."

"Don't know only one Mr. Linton, an' he's more'n twice as old as you be," replied Isaac, somewhat sourly, for he was not used to jokes from the club members. "I reckon you has made a mistake and got into the wrong club, sah."

"Why, is it possible that I am so altered?" asked Mr. Linton.

"Can't you see anything that reminds you of me?"

Isaac stared hard, and then said: "I reckon you're Mistah Linton's son, 'cause I done remember that he useter look something like you twenty years ago, but I know that you ain't him."

"Let me in and we will see what my old friends will say," said Mr. Linton.

"No, sah; I can't let no one in 'cept the club members," said old Isaac, firmly, "and I know you ain't Mistah Linton, nor his son, 'cause he ain't got no son. So you can't come in."

Mr. Linton insisted upon entering, and was so loud in his demands that several members, who were all old friends, too, came to the door, but they also firmly refused to admit the hearty, hale man who claimed to be old Mr. Linton, and when he insisted that he was that person—some of them telephoned for the police.

While they were arguing two officers came and took Mr. Linton away to the station house, in spite of his indignant protests. They put him in a cell at once, as the sergeant, who knew old Mr. Linton, refused to listen to his story for an instant.

He sat down in the narrow, cold cell and reflected for a minute, and then concluded to take things calmly; for, after all, he now saw that it was impossible to make people credit his wondrous tale. Then he went to sleep.

In the morning his cell door was opened by a policeman, who started back in surprise, saying:

"What is this? I arrested a man and put him in here about two o'clock this morning and here's a big boy! Who are you and how did you get here?"

"You have a poor memory," replied Mr. Linton. "You thrust me in here last night yourself."

"Don't try to fool me," answered the officer. "I put a man about twenty-five years old in here, boy. Where is he, and how did he get out?"

"I'm the man you looked up," replied Mr. Linton. "I am sorry to say it, but I think you must have been drinking, officer."

The angry policeman boxed his ears, shouting:

"Don't get fresh with me, young feller! Come out of that, and let's see what the sergeant and the judge will say."

He hauled Mr. Linton into the court room next to the police station, and the judge asked him:

"What is the charge against this lad?"

"I dunno, yer Honor. I found him in the cell where I left the man that claimed to be old Mr. Linton, and who was very likely crazy. I can't find the man, however."

Mr. Linton knew the judge very well; in fact, had helped to make him a judge, and he interrupted the officer, saying:

"Howard, this man has been drinking. I am sure you must

be able to see enough remains of my former looks to recognize me."

The judge stared and said:

"You are a very impudent boy to call me by my first name. I never saw you before. Who are you and where are your parents?"

"I am your old friend Roderick Linton, and I have had my youth restored by the application of a marvelous fluid. I will tell you all about it in your private office, Howard."

"Take him to the lunatic asylum!" said the judge, quietly.

"He ought to be examined, for I am sure he is insane."

Mr. Linton happened just then to glance into a large mirror, and was shocked to see reflected there the figure of a boy of perhaps seventeen. He was speechless, and before he could gather his wits together he was conducted to a carriage and started for the asylum.

On the way thither he looked about him and recognized the road and the wayside fields as the playground of his boyhood, although much changed, but still he remembered many a lane and many a secret nook among the rocks and woods thereabouts, and without hesitation he sprang from the carriage and flew across the field like a fox chased by the hounds.

The officer, a fat man and clumsy, pursued, but the nimble boy soon left him so far behind that he returned to the carriage and drove back to town, leaving Linton concealed among some shrubbery gleefully chuckling.

"This is finer yet," he said to himself. "I am a boy again. Now I will start all over and see what I can accomplish, but I must not make the mistake of trying to be old Linton. That is folly, and I ought to have thought of it at once."

He walked back to the city, and for a while amused himself watching some other boys playing ball, for it was Saturday morning, and then, the temptation proving too strong, he stepped up to the group and smilingly said:

"I should like extremely well to join you in your diversion, my lads, if you will permit me."

"Hully Gee!" shouted one of the boys. "What kind of a langwidge is dis? My lads! What's de matter wit youse? Who's fader is you, anyway?"

"Can you curve a ball, dat's what we want to know? If you can you're it, see?"

Linton scarcely knew what a curve was, but he stammered:

"I can at least make the endeavor, my lads."

They all looked at him in a sort of trance of astonishment, for the patronizing tone of his voice did not fit his youthful appearance. One boy placed the ball in his hand and motioned him to throw it to a lad at a distance.

"Now, let's see what kind of a twist you have got," said the boy, who was smoking a cigarette very rapidly. "Let her go!"

Linton threw the ball with all his might, but, as in his day curves had not been invented, he knew not how to impart the proper motion to the sphere, and his attempt to twist it sent it with great force plumb against the neck of a big boy far to the left, who instantly rushed at him with rage in his eyes.

While Linton was not a good pitcher he could run like a deer, and this he proved at once, for seeing that he had really hurt the boy he took to his heels with the whole gang after him. Down one street and up another he led them, and a keen memory of all the ancient games came to him as he fled.

Although the city had changed marvelously since his boyhood, many of the old streets and courts were unaltered, and many a good hiding-place, many a dark alley and back yard suddenly flashed into his mind, so over brick walls and through half-open gates he darted with the pack in full cry behind, and at last found himself opposite his own office in the Linton Building. Into the great marble doorway he dashed, nearly overturning the janitor, and quickly unlocking his door he slipped into his private office. The hall was almost instantly filled with excited boys, who were promptly driven out by the janitor, Maginnis, who then entered Mr. Linton's office and asked him what he was doing there.

Linton this time had his wits about him and replied:

"I was sent here by Mr. Linton to get something out of his safe, and those boys were chasing me."

He began to open the safe, and Maginnis eyed him with awe as he twirled the knob around with all the dexterity of forty years of practice, and when the door opened he said:

"Well, I guess you're all right, me lad, and I'll kape them little divils away from ye when ye go out."

"I must wait here for Mr. Linton," replied the lad, and then Maginnis retired. Linton sat there thinking for a long time, wondering what to do next, for, with his return of boyhood, his ideas were sadly jumbled. Although he remembered many of the details of his great business, all inclination to attend to it had gone and all he wished for was fun.

He soon took a large amount of money from the safe and started out to enjoy boyhood's keenest delights. First he purchased enough crullers, cream-cakes and cinnamon buns to supply a whole school, and then he visited every dime museum in town. A huge tin horn attracted his attention in a window and he bought it, as well as a bat and ball; then meeting another crowd of boys they repaired to a neighboring lot to play, but almost immediately ascertaining that Linton had a sum of money beyond all possible imagining, he was persuaded to buy

A Partial Solution of the Mystery of the Disappearance of An Old Man Who Disliked Children and Who Became a Child Again

a football, and that led to the purchase of complete outfits for every boy in the crowd, as well as an immense amount of candies.

It was while getting all these things that Linton suddenly confronted another mirror and discovered that he had shrunk into a much smaller boy than before, and with some alarm he observed that he was far smaller than the others. This alarmed him, because he knew with the small boy's instinct that he would soon be expelled from their society, as boys of a size flock together. Almost at once this became apparent, for one of the boys said:

"Say, what's dis little kid doin' with all that money, apy-how? Tain't right!"

"That's so," added another. "He's gotter divvy up."

So in spite of Linton's protests, when they had returned to the vacant lot wherein they played, they took away his bundle of money, and while their eyes bulged at sight of all that undreamed-of wealth they divided it between them, leaving but a few dollars for Linton, now the smallest among them all. He burst into angry weeping, and at the sight of his tears they drove him away howling, just as he had feared.

But he soon forgot his troubles, for there were so many things to see which seemed new to him that he had no time for reflection. The principal thing that now surprised him was the immensity of everything and the great distances between places.

With mingled awe and amazement he recognized his own friends, old gray-haired men and women, as they feebly walked along the streets, and more than once almost ran up to one to ask for his help to cross the wide roadway, filled with horses, automobiles and carts. He would wander into candy shops, and holding a few pennies in his chubby fingers, stand many long minutes in grave doubt and anxious debate as to just what candy he would buy, then with glee rush out and hang on behind a cart for blocks, until hours had passed and hunger again assailed him. At last, dirty and tired, but happy, he reached the home wherein he lived, and sat himself down on the doorstep. The key was in his trousers-pocket and he opened the door.

Out rushed Nora Casey, his servant of twenty years' faithful service, and she drove the dog away, taking the child into the house, where he soon ceased his blubbering and asked her if the plumber had fixed the leak in the sink; for, strange as it may seem, every little while he remembered everything that he had done or saw the day before.

She looked at him in a puzzled manner and then asked:

"Faith, an' what do you know about that sink?"

Recalled to himself, little Linton replied:

"I heard myself—I mean I told the plumber—no—I heard Mr. Linton tell him to mend it yesterday."

"It's bewitched the child, I'm sure!" cried Nora. "Whose little boy are you?"

"I am Mr. Linton's little boy," replied Roderick. "I am going to live here with you after this."

"Mercy on us!" cried Nora. "What's the child saying? Sure Mr. Linton has neither wife nor child!" She watched him as he went about the rooms of his house in a way that was child-like and yet like a man, and soon she began to be worried about this uncanny urchin. Finally she decided to wash his face and hands and wait for her master's return, but after she had done these things Roderick produced some money and asked her to go and buy him a hobby-horse, a toy locomotive, an alligator that would run all over the floor by itself, and a man-of-war with a real steam boiler.

"Sure it's a queer kid ye are!" she said, as she put on her hood. "But if them things will please ye, an' ye have the money, I'll git them."

Off she went and he was left alone. He promptly climbed upon a chair and looked into his shaving-glass only to find, as he had feared, that he had become still smaller and was now a child in red kilts. Long flaxen curls surrounded a chubby face that he no longer recognized at all, big blue eyes full of awe looked back at him from the depths of the mirror as from a past so remote that no memory of it existed.

Now and then in the gathering dusk he stopped to gaze with growing awe at the height, immense and surpassing, of the chamber walls, the immensity of the picture of Ponce de Leon's landing, the great easy chair and the tremendous giant's slippers that he formerly wore. In the shadows he thought he saw things that moved furtively toward him, for it was now quite dark, and he managed with great difficulty to light the lamp on the table so that the terrifying shadow-forms were dispelled.

Then Nora returned with the toys, a whole armful, but she declared that he ought to go to bed instead of playing with them. She had made inquiries all about the neighborhood, but nobody had lost a boy, and she had resolved to hand him over to the police in the morning.

"Faith," she said as she looked at him, "it seems belike yer different since I left ye!" She began to undress him. "And what's made yer hair so curly all of a sudden? I'm thinking there's some witchcraft about it all!"

She dropped him in the bed and ran out of the room crying: "It's some kind of a dwarf or changeling we have here! 'Tis no natural baby! He's grown younger since he came! I'll not stay here a minute, but I'll run for Father Brady!"

Roderick heard the door slam, and he wondered what Father Brady, whom he knew very well, would say about this marvel. Suddenly, as he pondered upon where it all would end, he thought of Tom Thumb and the awful experiences of that misbegotten; how the cow ate him and how he fell into a pie; and as one after another of Tom's adventures came to his mind he trembled for his own future if he was to become smaller constantly.

He sucked his thumb even as he reflected, and that showed him that he was already a baby, as well as the sight of his pink toes and fat-creased ankles. He felt terribly hungry and wondered why Nora had not brought him a bottle filled with nice milk instead of those big, nasty, hard toys that lay all about him on the bed.

She had forgotten to cover him up, and with great difficulty he crawled beneath the bed clothes, where after a time he became impatient at being left alone and tried to shout for her or somebody, anybody, in fact, to come to him; but now he was startled to find that instead of a shout he uttered a feeble wail.

He twisted and turned weakly in the bed, yelling constantly as he squirmed, but his wail grew feebler and weaker every minute, until at last, entirely exhausted by his efforts, he fell asleep.

Nora did not find Father Brady at home, for he was at a christening, and after she had waited for an hour she went to seek him, and so it was nearly ten o'clock when she returned with him to the house, and then when she came to the bedside, she was astonished to find no child upon it. He had vanished, and Father Brady glanced very queerly at her and said that something was wrong with her.

Nora looked everywhere, but never again did she see that infant, nor was old Mr. Linton ever seen again. He disappeared from off the earth completely, and nobody has ever been told how it happened until this story was written. He had simply become smaller and smaller until finally nothing at all was left of him.

Nora waited in the lonely house until she became an old, old woman, and then she died without ever learning what had caused her crusty old master's departure, and many a man who long ago pondered upon his strange disappearance will recall on reading this tale how great a mystery it all was.

But after all, the mystery, it seems to me, is really as great as ever. It is simple enough, of course, but how did the bottle get upon his table? That's the great puzzle.

WALT McDUGALL.